Igor Bondar

A DIVER'S NOTES

Australia

Igor Bondar

A DIVER'S NOTES

Australia

"Zolotoye sechenie"
2023

Several stories about underwater world of Australia.

Photo by autor.

“Zolotoye sechenie“ private publisher

ISBN 978-5-6050072-1-0

Snaky games

I often recall Brighton. He had something inside him from the *Crocodile Dundee* but with underwater snake specificity…

I had come here three times before I could manage to see this beautiful sunken ship. I was hindered by either a storm, a lack of people for a complete group or God knows what else. One should have a general knowledge about Australia in order to understand how they run a business there, especially in such a far off corner as this one. Here, time stopped, having been flooded and choked by beauty, happiness and peacefulness. And here I am, an anxious diver accompanied by my wife, looking quite normal for myself who has been grasped by a deadly desire to see this underwater write-off. A finished idiot… It was the lack of people for a complete group today again!

Having finally been desperate to get to the ship site by normal, natural means, I declared that I was ready to pay for the whole day's charter. I had nothing to lose because my expenses for each trip and stay in that kick-off corner were much higher. It seems that I have finally broken the local course of things with such a proposition. A dozen calls to *the boss* and a hundred sympathetic looks at me followed, as if I was hopelessly ill.

At last, the issue was solved but instantly, there arose another one: 'who would go with us as a guide?'. It was Sunday that day and working on such a day in Australia would be equivalent to high treason. And then I heard the name "Brighton" for the first time.

* * *

A 14-metre alloy boat cut the waves with ease. The weather on that day was unbelievably good. As we found out later, such still weather occurs only a couple of times per month. Our trip to the site took almost three hours so we had plenty of time to get acquainted with Brighton, as well as with a captain. They were both typical Australians from a backwater place who did not give much respect to any sort of rules. We smoked under a sign with a crossed cigarette, drinking good coffee. Then, the guys made me a paste called *Vegemite,* an Australian delicacy, spread thinly on a slice of bread. I almost died from its taste while Brighton and the captain laughed merrily. They both assured me that after a tenth try, I would no longer be able to live without this horridness.

Brighton asked me and my wife what in the upcoming dives was more fascinating to us: the sharks or the smalls. After hearing our answer, he nodded his head contentedly: he did not like the smalls too.

Underwater conditions for our dive on that day were as good as the weather on the surface: visibility under the water – endless, the ocean's temperature – a warm milk, other divers – are impossible by all means. Although, we were not very lucky with big-sized inhabitants on that day. There was only one bull shark that came past us and then hurried off. After that, my spouse and I became bored with the underwater. It was obvious that Brighton sympathized with us and we felt that he was much worried about our wasted expenses for travelling to this place. And therefore the snakes came into play.

I must say, the seabed there was filled with the sea snakes – which the divers call *flat tails* or *sea olive snake.* There were two types of them: brown and brown-striped. All the rest in them were absolutely identical in size and physical looks. Of the things I knew about flat tails, I recalled their poisonousness very well –

more than that of a cobra! Therefore, when Brighton picked up the first plain-coloured, two-metre band from the seabed and started swinging it just above his head, I was mildly stunned. But nothing bad happened. There even was an impression that the snake liked this game. Meanwhile, Brighton picked up the second, third and fourth snake. It seemed as if he was trying different neckties underwater. With my camera firmly on hand, I kept shooting that action.

Soon, the excitement of an animal handler awakened in me too. I asked Brighton with a gesture for permission to pick up a snake from the seabed. He agreed, warning me that if it begins to jerk, I should set it free at once. Two divers can talk about a lot under the water! I picked up my first snake from the seabed. At first, I held it cautiously by the tip of its tail with one hand, then I became more and more confident. Soon, I could repeat some of Brighton's tricks.

After that, my wife showed some interest for it too. At first she was careful, but then – more persistently – began to master the art of an underwater handler. I would purr near my camera's viewfinder, looking at my wife at times with a snake and thinking – which of them is more poisonous?

Then, my eyes caught a striped sea snake. Men seek diversity at times. I gestured to Brighton asking for permission to pick it up. Brighton shuddered from such a request. He crossed his arms on his chest so elaborately, rolling his eyes upwards that I guessed what the consequences would have been, had I picked it up. Apparently, these similar-looking sea snakes differed much in their character. For some reason, I was inclined to fully trust him in this issue.

That wonderful day of diving granted me a rare prize with dozens of beautiful and unusual photographs.

Never again did I feel the desire to hold a snake in my hands. Perhaps it was because Brighton was not around, or perhaps it was for the word *fool* I would hear every time I showed these photographs with the sea snakes. But in any case, I am very grateful to that Australian guy who made sure that we saw a lot of interesting and unusual things under water. And, if we ever meet again, I definitely won't have to worry about the quality of my dive.

Spin the bottle

Many of us have probably played this fine and simple game in our childhood. Back then, everything was new and thrilling. The first kiss is never forgotten… However, this story is about a different game. Although, who knows? Maybe, it would have finished with a kiss too? I did not bring it to a close…

It happened on one of my diving safaris in Australia. An underwater reef lay in a remote place, some 200 kilometres off the shore: a huge and vibrant reef with splendid vertical walls that fell into the abyss of the blue.

Visibility there at times seemed like I was looking at an underwater silhouette of New Zealand. Also, it was wonderful to see different sharks around. There were many of the *finless* and quite often there were bigger *grey reef* ones. There were fewer of *hammerhead* sharks and three-metre *silver* sharks.

However, most of all were divers in all the spots underwater. As with many Australian safaris, there were nearly thirty of them including guides and instructors. Near the reef, there were all these masses who would bubble, make camera flashes, quack and rush towards all the living things. Of course, the sharks did not want to participate in this *party* on principle. How would I communicate with these gracious predators in such a situation?

Certainly, I could have suspended myself somewhere in the dense blue of the sea, somewhere away from the group. But how would I make the sharks swim closer to me? I shared these sad thoughts of mine while having lunch with my old acquaintance Steve. On the boat, he was responsible for all the issues related to diving. He had been diving in those waters as an instructor for

about five years which gave him enormous experience. ‘Why don’t you play on the bottle?’, he advised me.

At first I thought that Steve was just hinting that it was time for a drink some alcohol together. I would not have objected to keeping company with my friend, but *it’s only midday now, sir*. Then, I supposed it was one more Australian joke that I had not heard of. And only by the end of my thinking, I assumed it may be something really interesting and asked him to explain it to me.

‘It’s simple’, Steve explained. ‘Take an empty plastic bottle underwater with you and crumple it so that it makes a typical sound. The sharks are attracted to this sound and will come very close to you.’

I quickly emptied the nearest water bottle, stuffed it into the compensator and began to prepare for the dive. I started to think along these lines: ‘Well, Steve, if you have joked with me this way, the coming evening will be very upsetting for you. To such a joke, I’ll have to respond with some decent nasty thing. If the sharks will not come to this crumpling sound, I’ll dedicate the remaining part of the dive to devise a revenge.’

Having dropped into the water, I immediately held back behind the group and suspending into the blue of the water, not far from the reef. There were several hundred meters below me when I took out my new type of musical instrument from my compensator pocket. At 30 metres depth, it became as hard as a stone. I had to unscrew its cap and let some air out. After that, I easily made my first accord: *crunch-crunch*. A thought was involuntary spinning in my head: ‘it’s good that no one sees what an idiot Steve is making out of me’. I was about to finish this strange concert and pass on to plan B – devising a revenge plan for this evening, when suddenly…

They literally materialized from the blue of the water. There were three sharks, two of which were grey reef ones and one big silver shark, slightly ahead of the others. There was no doubt where they were heading: they were coming right towards me. I was crumpling the bottle as hard as I could, my heart nearly leapt: ‘It’s working!’ Distance between me and the sharks was closing. Ten, seven, five metres. It seemed they were ready to climb to the performer’s scene. There were about three meters left, but the sharks did not change direction or speed. I stopped crumpling the bottle and bowed. Ultimately, the sharks are not like rabbits. Besides, the children expected some presents when I came home. Generally, there were many reasons for taking a break.

At the same moment, the sharks seemed ‘disenchanted’. They instantly turned ninety degrees and swam to the side from me, showing no interest. ‘*Wow!’* I took out my proven magical bottle and began to play with more sense: *munch crunch, munch crunch.*

Everything repeated itself like the first time. And again, I stopped playing when the sharks were just a few metres away from me.

I was feeling like Mozart during his debut. The sharks returned to me several times and I was just happy with such close communication with these gracious predators. Then, my instrument received a leak and the bottle was filled instantly with water.

The sound it made after that seemed to interest no one any longer. I did not regret much of what happened. The impressions that I already had would be enough for ten dives. My thoughts regarding Steve became the opposite and I started guessing what sort of beer this fine Australian guy likes the most.

Later in the evening, over a glass of a foamy beer, Steve looked at me passingly. ‘Sorry, I forgot to warn you, Igor. You should stay very aware, while playing on the bottle and keep looking around. One of my fellow’s arse was bitten by a bull shark, while he was crumpling the plastic.’

Then the diving instructor sipped his favourite beer. I would have paid a lot for it now to be fish oil instead of beer in his glass.

Circled by the sharks

Divers can talk for a long time about various sea creatures. Remembering dives is like an aftertaste which remains after a good wine or coffee. Although, there is a category of underwater creatures which evokes an increased interest.

The sharks – this story is about them, of course – always attract and frighten people. A long list of terrible films in this regard have only made the situation worse. Sharks are simply an endless topic for the directors of many horror films.

I had the practice of communication with these beautiful and perfect predators as well. There was a time – at the first meetings with them – then I mechanically expected some unpleasant episodes of a popular Jaws film to continue. But, it seemed, the sharks simply did not see that film and behaved very differently. And then I thought - who are these sharks really?

This, I still do not know. It does not matter how many of them you have met. In order to understand sharks entirely, you should be a shark too. In any other case, your conclusions about sharks will be incomplete. Nevertheless, some simple conclusions, experience still allows us to draw.

* * *

It was a quiet, sunny morning. Scarce and sleepy clouds were crawling across the sky. The ocean at the reef shone with all colours of blue spectrum: from turquoise one to the deepest blue. We stood on a distant reef in the Coral Sea which layed about two hundred kilometres from the nearest shore. Under our ship's keel, the sea bed was not quite close.

Deep water, current, perfect visibility and not a single ship on the horizon – what else do the sharks beneath need to be absolutely happy? Right, the food. And that was exactly what we came here for. It had long become tradition to feed the sharks on

this reef's northern plateau. Although, this story is about a slightly different dive.

Alexander, my mate, was not an experienced diver at that time yet. After a couple of trips to the Red Sea, he had happily left the lines of outstanding novices. This is also because having the perfect physical abilities and a morale of a retired officer helped him to quickly gain the experience.

In the early morning, we dived in the site where the sharks were usually fed. In fact, this action would normally be performed much later. The sharks somehow know the hour and the day of feeding and try not be late to the table. Averagely, there are twenty to forty sharks of all paints and sizes come to feed: white-finned sharks, grey reef sharks, sometimes hammerhead sharks, and, of course, massive silver sharks. At times, they get so close that they touch the flashes of the underwater camera.

Alexander and I went for this dive together. Our ship was right near the reef so we dropped to the sea from the rear deck. *Purr*… Why not purr from pleasure when the water temperature is twenty eight degrees? Our further descent into the plateau took only a couple of minutes. Plenty of multi-coloured fishes were swimming around us in the shoals; we did not see any sharks there.

Now I want to tell you my little secret. Having been to this site many times for the feeding, I paid attention to one thing there: Local guides always rattle a chain attached to the reef in order to attract the sharks. Such sound travels a great distance underwater, communicating to the sharks that they are welcome to the feast. I beg your pardon, dear tour organizers, but sometimes I use this chain for my personal needs.

And this morning, having swum up to it, I started shaking it energetically trying to produce the sound I needed. My mate stood ten metres away from me, understanding nothing of that. The only thing he might have been thinking back of then was the effect of a long diver's life on brain activity in humans. Everything changed when the sharks arrived. Graciously and inevitably, they materialized slowly from a dark blue matter of the sea. Five, ten, twenty. The sharks began circling around me slowly, waiting for the food. My underwater *con had* worked effectively! I kept rattling with the chain, being pleased with the sight of these gracious predators.

Having played enough for my own pleasure, I drew the attention of my mate Alexander and asked him to change places. He looked around in hopes that I was calling someone else there. But having realized that there was nobody else, he started coming towards me very slowly. I had seen such speed before only at

funerals only. Soon, Alexander took over the chain and I swam aside. Why not make his first date perfect?

Twenty minutes passed. We had already exceeded the underwater staying limit but Alexander kept rattling and rattling the chain as if he had gone insane, with the sharks making a dense circle around him. It was a pity to interrupt such a beautiful underwater merry-go-round, but we were only guests there, unfortunately.

Alexander hardly removed the regulator out of his mouth aboard the ship, when he burst into an endless monologue. He spoke about how comfortable and safe he felt there and about his attempts to establish contact with the sharks. His efforts to growl at them underwater to show that he was their leader made me shake with laughter. He could not help it - an officer's position had to prove itself. Also, he expressed his gratitude for the opportunity I had presented to him.

And that was the point. Sometimes, our stereotypes are broken much quicker and easier than they are acquired.

An unfortunate day

It was too late when I realized what an unfortunate day it was. If only I could have known before, I would not have moved anywhere until late evening. But the sun that shone brightly, a light wind and a constant lust for adventures lured me. Besides, I received a skipper's license recently so I could theoretically cut all the waves around Australia. But that was theoretically.

The folks flooded the boat: my family of five persons, including my elderly son Denis and my friends George and Arseniy. All of us were eager to sail somewhere and dive in some place. At first, things went quite alright. We left the port without any incidents and sailed to the island where we had planned to dive without facing any adventures. Our good luck left us soon after we arrived at the destination.

There were giant waves at the site we planned to dive. Having thought for a while, we decided to anchor in a calm bay on another side of the island, then walk back across the island with our equipment. To us, the walking distance from the boat seemed insignificant. We did what we planned; the anchor dropped quickly and four of the men wore their equipment without delay.

Problems arose as soon as I started climbing to the zodiac. A mount of the rubber boat opened for some reason and it moved away slightly from the board. When I stepped into it, the distance between the boats increased. As a result of these manoeuvres, I found my feet in the zodiac that set off while my hands held the boat's rail tightly, and the rest of my gear was swinging above the water. Laughing out loud, the crew dragged me to opposite side. The children were especially happy at this as they always missed the funny dad. After a few fails to get back to the deck, I sadly opened my hands and fell into the water.

The second time around, our group sat in the zodiac with more success. In a few minutes, the sand of a picturesque shore scratched the zodiac's bottom. Having taken flippers with our kit fully out, guided by looks of amazed people resting on the beach, we headed decisively not towards the water, but towards the forest.

It was frying hot as the air temperature had long passed the 30-degree mark. Having gained a good pace right from the flying start, we headed towards the opposite shore of the island. Although, the last distinguishable path proved to end twenty steps away. Further, there began impenetrable thicket. Like *commandos,* we broke stoically through this unforeseen obstacle course. Every five metres, we had to wave away a huge web with a big spider sitting in its centre. Our flippers was ideally suited for this job. I even thought that I should have patented its secondary designation of use. But soon, from hot weather and fatigue, my thinking processes of a genius slowed and then, they all faded away.

Some thirty minutes later, being dead tired, we crawled to a sandy shore. Naïve me – I thought our trip would have taken less than five minutes. I looked at my companions and realized that my reputation was now stained badly. Well, that's nothing, now we are by the water and diving is not far away.

Having looked with more attention at the shore line, my optimism sank - one-metre-high waves broke against the sand shore. Besides, there was a pool of strange, bronze-coloured leaves floating by the shore, having been blown from somewhere. These bronze flakes ended ten metres away from the shoreline but it was too late to retreat. I was the first to have step courageously into the water.

Having prevailed the beat of waves, we dived in. The next bad news was that underwater visibility was only a couple of metres. I took my son by the hand, and together we swam using a compass. However, underwater swimming was as if we were swimming in milk. It bored us quickly and we decided to return to the shore. Having entered the tide line, I let my son go and by

trying to stay on my feet – proceeded further to the beach. When I came ashore, I looked back.

The scene that I witnessed was worth impressing in a painting. Right by me, my son was crawling out of the water with varied success. With the bronze leaves stuck to his back, he continuously swayed back and forth in the waves, resembling a bronze seal playing in the tide.

Five steps further from the water, there sat an impressive bronze statue of George recovering his breath. All the grief of the universe could be seen on his face. Further on, there was Arseniy standing in the water by the belt, searching desperately for something on the bottom. As we found out later, he was looking for his fin. Probably, I also did not look much better, as everyone who looked at me smiled in some odd manner.

Having recovered a little, our shabby and seasoned squad trudged sadly towards the boat. Our equipment seemed to weigh much heavier then before. Big air tanks seemed to have been filled with lead. So when we, the bronze divers, finally crawled to our familiar beach, the tourists resting there were completely puzzled. They were looking at us in surprise, as if we were aliens and trying to understand, what we were doing here.

Who would have told us…?

For whom the whale cries?

The whales always cry underwater. In fact, they certainly talk to each other in this way. Perhaps, they even laugh at a new joke

about the divers, but to us their sound resembles a human cry. And, the force of the sound is so high that it could be heard several kilometres away. During the whale season in Australia, divers will often hear this magical cry of the giants.

* * *

It is hard but interesting to be an *early bird*. It is hard, because no matter what time you went to sleep the day before, your inner alarm clock would always mercilessly throw you out of bed at 6 am. However, it is interesting because early morning is a special time. The sun rises and nature wakes up in freshness. There is a deafening silence as well, as the *night owls* appear only a few hours later. And they have got an absolutely different alarm clock – their stomach.

It was nearly six o'clock in the morning as I was sitting on an open balcony of my hotel room enjoying a unique sunrise. In my hands was a camera with a long-focus lens designed for taking photos of remote objects. The theme of my wildlife photography was humpback whales on the water surface. I chose this island, the hotel and even the floor specifically for this occasion. From here you could see a calm bay in plain sight; this was one the whales' favorite places.

Well-well, who is there? One more early bird is coming to the shore. *Hello, fellow!* He carried a bright-coloured board with a sail in his hands, obviously determined to catch the morning breeze. Well, I guess the more models in the water, the better for me. That surfer quickly sailed farther into the bay as I finished preparing the camera.

It was a good time for the whales to appear. I took my marine binoculars and started searching the bay attentively. *Got it!* A group of five whale entering the bay from the right. They moved slowly and ceremoniously to its centre, throwing high fountains periodically.

Turning my head slightly, I saw the surfer taking the course, which would likely intercept with the whales. None of them saw each other yet. Well, the course of things seemed to be promising. That part of the bay had depth of no more than ten metres, that is why the whales did not disappear from the water surface for long. I hurried to take a couple of trial pictures to choose the best settings.

When there was about a thirty meter distance to the whales left, the surfer finally spotted them probably by hearing the fountains' noise. I could see how his behavior changed a little. However, this guy turned out to be a brave man. After a moment of hesitation,

the board with the sail headed to the centre of the whales' group. That *early bird* was pretty cool!

The humpback whales usually are quite timid, despite their enormous size. They will always swim aside even from a small boat. But it seemed that it was a different case. The board was tiny and produced almost no noise, therefore the whales kept on moving, as if nothing had happened.

Soon, the surfer found himself in the centre of the whales' group, and having made a manoeuvre, he sailed along with them. It seemed, that nothing had changed in the whales' behaviour, but I swear that those were cunning animals! Now, exhaling, the whales began to release large fountains, and the surfer sometimes fell into a cloud of sprayed water. Observed from the side, it looked amazing. I could only imagine what the guy was experiencing inside that whale water park!

However, soon, the whales moved to the side. They will probably cry all day for their new friend. I was sitting down, being kindly jealous of that lucky guy. Encounters of such level happen so rarely in our lives that they remain bright memories for many years. Right, it is not bad to be an *early bird*!

A soft noise coming from my room distracted me. Oh, the *night owls* are awakening! Certainly, they also have the right to their piece of happiness, in particular, if this piece has been cooked well. Well, I would better go and cook breakfast.

The lucky unlucky

Many of the divers are interesting and impassioned people. The fact that a human being feels the desire to experience the beauty of underwater-viewing points to some of its inner romanticism. Although, some of them start digging even deeper into it, thus there come to light *the underwater philosophers.*

* * *

It happened a few years ago. Fate brought us together with this man so far from civilization that I would not like to go there a second time. Oddly enough, in such remote corners you can often meet very interesting and unusual people.

My mate's name was Terry. I had long wanted to make acquaintance with him, that is why our encounter was not accidental. On many topics, he was close and interesting to me. Terry was an incorrigible romantic who had fallen in love with the underwater world forever. He was a fan of the sharks and a brilliant photographer. You can spend hours admiring the work of him and his faithful underwater companion - a monster with many lenses and flashes, called an underwater camera. It became its integral part in the depths of the sea. Moreover, If a flash was ripped off his camera, I think Terry would have bled to death. And such underwater creature, some new species – a *phototerrisaur* – swam under the water with me, complex in appearance, but however, quite harmonious inside.

Yes, underwater he felt at home. But in a dusty city, Terry seemed to be a mixture of boring Earthly contradictions as old and eternal as the world itself. However, namely from such boredom philosophers are sometimes born.

It was a calm, windless evening. I felt fresh and comfortable at the upper deck. The sunset impressed me with its beauty, when high plumbeous clouds were painted in pink and created a feeling of being inside a fairytale. A red wine on our table harmonized perfectly with the sunset as well as its taste with our good mood. A diving day that had just finished brought us a lot of positive experiences. We had seen the best of the underwater that this place could offer. Our cameras still laid in a corner packed but no one had the slightest doubt that they contained perfect shots.

'You know, Igor,' Terry sipped the wine, 'haven't you thought why we see the best things at every dive here? The group before us haven't seen even a half of that'.

To win myself some time, I sipped my wine too. Then, I sipped a little more. Having realized that it would run out before I said anything smart, I fired the version that first came to mind.

'Perhaps, the season's higher, Terry.'

'That's a no.' It seemed that Terry was even glad that I missed. 'The season's in its middle right now. Any other guesses?'

'Well, I don't know… maybe it's current, moon phases, plankton'. I fired a burst, hoping that at least one bullet would hit the target.

'A miss again!' Terry smiled. 'It all's quite simple here too.'

By then the wine seemed a little sour to me. I gave a questioning look to the smartie, trying to make him realize that it was a good time for him to speak as well..

‘Fine. I’ll tell what the thing is.’ *He was a good guy, after all.* ‘The thing’s that we are the lucky guys. All the divers of the world are divided into two categories: the lucky and the unlucky. There’re some intermediary types too, but first, let’s consider the main variants. The first is always lucky. They are able to see everything, everywhere and anytime. Reason for this lies in themselves. Usually they are lighthearted and cheery, there aren’t any sharp contradictions and anxiety in them. They go underwater with pleasure and happiness. So they receive everything, whatever they want. And often, even more than that. As for the unlucky, it’s the opposite. The reason for that – is the anxiety inside them. They worry about everything and all the time. Even while going out for shark dives, indeed, they would often be much happier that they do not occur. Their fear of possible equipment damage, strong currents, poor visibility, dangerous sea creatures and other things, deprives them of the lightheartedness. As a result, they have much less underwater luck.’

Terry kept silent for a moment.

‘So, for many years I’ve been on the lookout so that I do not get into a company of the unlucky. They possess that unique quality to frighten everything interesting. So, if you happen to have such a mate, don’t doubt: everything will roll out according to his version of script. Your optimism will not prevail over his pessimism, as a car is much easier to slow down than to accelerate’.

He finished his monologue and turned his face towards the sunset that was fading away. I pondered over everything he had said in relation to my previous experiences. One by one, memories from previous trips’ started rising in my head, for each of them, I could easily distinguish the lucky and the unlucky. Well, there was something in this theory, perhaps…

Years have passed. Terry's theory proved to be a useful gift for me, as the life that followed confirmed it to work a hundred percent. Moreover, in the course of time, I even improved its details. And, maybe, thanks to it, there occurred many interesting and beautiful events in my life.

The kingdom of the leopards

It was a warm January day in Australia. The bird's cheery twitter of various timbres sounded from the forest. Combined, it came out as a very beautiful and cheerful forest melody. I looked at the trees more attentively. The leaves of a near eucalypt were hardly moving. Fearing to frighten off my luck, I searched the Internet for the current weather forecast. Yes! Forecast said that the ocean was practically calm. Such ideal weather rarely occurs in January and so would be sinful to miss it. I rushed to the telephone to call George.

George is my old Australian friend with whom I go diving. A few years before, being slightly drunk, we both swore a terrible oath. Its gist is that if we ever swap diving for work, let all the troubles of the world fall upon us. When we sobered up it was too late - the magic had already worked. That is why we are both just doomed to eternal diving together. To tell the truth, George reassured me that he read somewhere that twin blondes could easily 'unspell' us. I don't believe it much, but…

It took us just an hour to drive to one of our favourite places – Byron Bay, located in the north of New South Wales. Jack – the

owner of a local diving centre – kept a couple of seats for us on the next boat. Having put on our suits quickly, we dived into our car and drove to the shore. In this dive center the boats are dropped into the water right from a trailer. Commonly, it is quite a fun show. Then, divers turn the boats to point forwards and with a running wave move it further from the shore. When it becomes deep, they all jump aboard simultaneously and the captain turns engines on. It is worth mentioning that this is a popular place among those who love to ride waves standing on a board. That is why, having sailed away from the shore, a skipper has to ride slowly evading all the surfers.

The distance from the shore to the dive-site was only three kilometres, so after five minutes the skipper tied our boat to a buoy. A glance over the board was enough to realize that underwater visibility was at its best. It was good news given that I had another friend with me – a big underwater camera. A backward dive immediately morphed me from a dry land creature into something flippered. I do love these transformations!

The underwater world shone with an array of colours. Rays of sunlight coming through the small waves made everything around alive, transforming the underwater world into a kingdom of fairy tales. There, frisked hundreds of colourful fishes frisked and corals played with bright tints. It was the kingdom you could never get accustomed to.

George and I swam slowly to a place where a plain seabed changed into a beautiful white sand between tiny stone piles. Namely that site was most loved by local underwater dwellers whose quantity here is just enormous.

Five leopard sharks swam above the first sandy meadow. Their long, beautiful tails merged into a uniform dance swaying in

smooth rhythm. The spotty skin of the sharks played incredibly in the sun rays that penetrated here. Here they are – the hosts of the local reef!

Having adjusted my camera, I moved to the centre of that circle dance. I greatly desired to take pictures of it from the inside. At the same instant, a large leopard shark swam out of this group and moved slowly towards me. The distance between us closed quickly. '*It apparently wants to clash*,' this thought came to my head when there was only one metre left between us. As I prepared my head for the crash, the shark suddenly made a sharp turn to the side, touching my shoulder lightly with its tail. *Whew!* I recovered my breath, wondering what would happen next.

Everything afterwards was simple. A leader-shark – I have no doubt about her status – swam past it pack and moved away from the meadow. The rest members of its circle swam after boss. It turned out that I had recaptured a large and cozy meadow from a pack of sharks. Feeling a rush of pride, I sat down at the centre of a new property and looked at George. A flock of colorful fish at this moment clearly interested him more than my resonant triumph. I looked at his fishes scornfully and swam further.

That was a leopard shark's day. I fought off four more meadows in a very similar way. Each time the leader of the pack came out, headed on closely and turned aside at the last moment. After that, the whole group abandoned this place. Having studied the photographs of all the leaders later, I discovered that all this sharks were different. This could be seen by the various scars around their mouths.

Rays are a specialty for leopard sharks. However, not a single ray has given up his life without an attempt to defend itself. And, judging by traces from the ray's thorns on the sharks' mouths, most rays carry out their last attack quite successfully. As a result, each shark's nose carries a characteristic pattern from many stab wounds. So, it is impossible to confuse them.

A touch of manta

Undoubtful is the fact that all of the underwater dwellers possess their unique charm. The sharks will conquer with a predator's form of perfection, the rays – with gracefulness of wavy movements and the small fishes possess an incredible

variation of colours and tints. They all may be marveled at for a long time. Should you ask me if something exists underwater at which you may look for eternity, I will reply yes. On the dry land, you may look as long as you want at fire burning, water flowing and some other things. Under the water, you can look endlessly at a charming manta.

A manta's grace is incomparable. Immense and stately, they literally make you stare at them as if they possess some magic. A few times while observing them, I disconnected from the course of time so much that I forgot to check the air level in my tank. It is good that all these sites are relatively shallow and there was enough air left to rise to the surface.

The mantas are very curious. Playfulness can be seen in their wide set eyes. If they are not frightened by the number of people underwater – as long as all divers follow rules of good conduct with these magnificent animals – they can afford a closer contact.

* * *

That day had quite a promising beginning. Before, the wind – which had been annoying the whole week – had rested and the waves calmed down after that. The ocean was almost still and a small divers' boat went at its highest pace. The sun rays pierced the blue deeply and made the underwater world below play lively from the light. The dolphins deeply love such weather. Their shining, black backs followed us almost up to the reef.

Having tied our boat to a buoy, George and I put on equipment slowly and stepped into the water. The underwater world was at its best that day as well. Turtles, rays, spotted eagle rays and leopard sharks would come up there every minute. We swam towards our favourite site where a dozen of big underwater stones

form a particular labyrinth with a maximum concentration of living creatures inside. A wave-like sand between these stones is the best underwater bed for me, besides having grandious views of surroundings.

Having settled down with comfort on one of such meadows, I started my usual observation, when suddenly somebody's shadow closed the sunlight cast upon me for a couple of seconds. Dear me! It is Australia and a big shadow here can be cast by many of those who I would not really want to see. I raised my head slowly.

A manta! I will always welcome such shadow. Not too big, some three metres in its span, it swam very closely above me, skewing at me slyly with its nearest eye. Then, having done a small pirouette, it headed down to me. It seemed that it felt bored and it would not mind playing a little. I decided to participate in it play.

Somewhere, someday, somebody told me how a manta ray could be attracted. According to that version, one should wave his hand synchronically with her movements. In such case, the manta will assume you are a distant relative and comes closer. '*That's nonsense*,' I thought back then but idea is remained in my head. Therefore, now holding a stone with one hand, I started making smooth, wavy motions with my other hand. I glanced at George who was sitting quietly behind the stone, and realised that he was shaking with suppressed laughter. Well, of course - if I now looked like a relative of a manta, then a very sick and heavily mutated.

Although, it seemed the manta did not think so. Having stopped, it stood near me and started moving her fins slowly. I tried to fit together with it as much as I could by keeping the pace and bending my back. Our 'fins' started approaching to each other. Half a metre, ten centimetres, five, a touch! It was as if a weak

electric current ran through me. The manta moved slightly away, because maybe I shuddered. Having turned around to George with a triumphant look, I saw in his eyes what I had wanted to see – a huge, diver's jealousy.

The manta did not come back anymore. Everything is as with the people - sometimes they return and sometimes they do not. Everyone has freedom of choice. Well, enough for my underwater philosophy. There are many places that are much more suitable for such purposes. Let us swim back to the cutter, Georgie, I have got a wonderful topic for a night's beer talk.

Revenge against a parrot

Once while having been in a splendid mood after a great dive, I put my key into a key hole of my room's door. As I entered the corridor, I froze. A view that my eyes beheld, reminded me of a chaos. There laid bits of apple all over the floor. All the bags of chips and cookies were torn apart with cruelty. But the most terrible thing happened to my pack of coffee. I always take a pack of good ground coffee with me on all my travels. My love for this divine drink is endless. So, someone dealt with him, using the worst form of cruelty - I counted twenty holes in the pack. The pack itself laid on the floor in the middle of the room, bleeding with a noble brown-coloured powder from all of its lethal wounds. I would have forgiven the robber for everything, but not for the coffee…

It was a big beautiful island called Hamilton, located off the north-east coast of Australia. The island almost sank into a fleshy green but the most amazing thing was the number of local birds. They were sitting almost on every branch, pole and roof there. A roar of their singing often howled down our talk. Undoubtedly, the leaders of this feathered army were big white cockatoo parrots with strong, hooked beaks.

I immediately liked my room – a spacious landscape with a splendid view and a large balcony. There were some notices with instructions hanging in front of the balcony exit. I did not really want to read it, when I first arrived at this hotel. I only read what was underlined in red: that it was always necessary to close the sliding doors. Now, I will read the instructions much more attentively, when I arrive at new places. Back then, I did not pay attention to the fact that it was about glass doors. When I left the

room to go diving, I diligently just closed the balcony doors that had a mosquito net.

So now, I was standing in the middle of this chaos with my heart leaping from a righteous wrath. In the balcony net, there was a real doorway bitten through, forty to twenty centimetres in size.

A desecrated coffee called for revenge. Having remembered that revenge is a dish best served cool, I decided to calm down and sat in an armchair. Little by little, details of a future vendetta against a parrot (I did not doubt it was him) appeared in my head.

Two hours later, I sat in the same armchair amidst a clean room. I sat motionless as if I had become part of the furniture in the room. A rubber was tied to my index and middle fingers. It was a type of camping slingshot - I used some experience from my childhood. My right hand was squeezing a big pellet folded from a piece of thick paper. A metre away from the hole in the net laid a big red apple which had been bought specially for this operation. All the decorations were set in their places and music from a spy film was playing in my head.

It flew in about twenty minutes later. It was a big white parrot with the most arrogant muzzle. I did not hesitate in the slightest that it was him who had plundered my room several hours before. In criminology, there is a fact known as the return of the criminal to the crime scene. He stood for a minute in front of the hole, looking at the apple. It was obvious that his intuition objected to such incredible luck. But, the apple was too red.

He made his first step, then one more. Almost with an invisible movement, I started drawing my slingshot. Any mistake of mine would be equivalent to a loss. The parrot approached the apple

slowly, taking half-steps. Having reached it, he opened his beak with some apprehension.

With a shout *for the coffee,* I fired at the burglar. The shock in his eyes was the best reward for me. The pellet slapped him in the area where his legs grew from. With a cry of terror, the parrot rushed towards the balcony spreading his wings. Due to this, he first could not get out through the aperture he had bitten. Then, shrinking somehow, the pretty thief literally rolled out of the room. The coffee was avenged…

The following morning, I discovered that my balcony had been stained with a thick layer of birds' droppings. A small nasty trick, fitting right with my burglar's style. In order to produce such a large amount of it, the parrot seems to have had to call all its feathered counterparts on the island. It will obviously be unusual for the cleaner, and he will have to go for a shovel. Well, it was a time for me to go morning diving. And then, a cup of good black coffee, certainly!

Fruits of the sea

Someday, we will surely open a museum room in the diving centre dedicated to underwater findings. We would gather hundreds of various items that people have lost and we picked up from the seabed of Australia. It should be interesting to see what kind of items the humankind mostly loses in the water? To find that out, we tried conducting our own analysis based on the materials we had. Perhaps, this will help somebody to somehow prevent these losses in the future.

So, taking first place with a big handicap were sunglasses, of course. Their overall percentage makes half of all our trophies and if expressed in quantity, they have already filled two buckets. The sunglasses that were lost were of all possible kinds: from cheap ones costing five dollars which dropped from the nose of a schoolgirl, to very expensive ones which fell off from an impressive sized-nose of a prestigious boat's owner.

Some day, we will decorate a big Christmas tree with them for the New Year and it will immediately be added to the Guinness Book of World Records. Parts of these glasses lost their transparency from rubbing against the sand for a long time and now are only suitable for cat Basilio to deceive a trusting Buratino again.

The second place in our list is securely held by the swimming glasses and masks. These goods fill a full bucket as well. Thus, despite the fact that the human head is the most clever body part, considering the things dropped from it, it may rightfully be placed much lower than it is.

Naval anchors are in third place. They totalled twelve in our collection, not counting those that we gave away. The smallest anchor weighs only three kilograms and the biggest one weighs more than a hundred. I do not want to remember how George and I were dragging it. It was not a dive, but an hour of underwater heavy weight lifting. But now, it is the best item in our anchor collection.

The fourth place is held by common and underwater knives. There are only four of them. It seems they dropped into the water when not quite experienced skippers tried to cut the ropes of those anchors which are in our collection as well.

Furthermore, there are screws. There are only two of them. One of them is completely new and awfully expensive. From time to time, we are greatly concerned with the problem of where to stick them. And, what versions have not been suggested there! An underwater Karlsson on the reef – is only one of those decent only.

In the category of single finds, there are: an umbrella, a harpoon gun, a fishing rod, a landing net and *an instantly water-welcome* wrist watch.

And, finally, the most precious thing – jewelry. We have got about half a bucket of these. Got you! I am joking, of course. In fact, we only have got three items of jewelry. People part with these things somewhat painfully. All we have managed to find during these years – was a massive silver ring, a golden earring and a golden chain. In fact, they were found in the same order according to the increase in their cost. This seems to be promising and provides us with some hope that someday, at the end of this list a good chest from a Spanish galleon will appear.

CONTENTS:

Snaky games…..……..3
Spin the bottle…….…7
Circled by the sharks……..…10
An unfortunate day……14
For whom the whale cry?……...17
The lucky and unlucky…….…..….21
Kingdom of the leopards…….24
A touch of manta……27
Revenge against a parrot……..……..31
Fruits of the sea…….. 34

Photo by author

Igor N. **Bondar**

A DIVER'S NOTES

Australia

www.dolphinsdivingdreams.com

12+